




# WHAT IS IDENTITY?

Prof. Almash Seidikenova


- 
- Personal identity is the concept you develop about yourself that evolves over the course of your life. This may include aspects of your life that you have no control over, such as where you grew up or the color of your skin, as well as choices you make in life, such as how you spend your time and what you believe. You demonstrate portions of your personal identity outwardly through what you wear and how you interact with other people. You may also keep some elements your of personal identity to yourself, even when these parts of yourself are very important.

# Universal aspects of Identity

- Cross-cultural psychologist Alan Roland (1988) has identified three universal aspects of identity present in all individuals: (1) an individualized identity, (2) a familial identity, and (3) a spiritual identity. Cultural groups usually emphasize one or two of these dimensions and downplay the other(s). Let's see how this works. The individualized identity is the sense of an independent "I," with sharp distinctions between the self and others. This identity is emphasized by most groups in the United States, where young people are encouraged to be independent and self-reliant at a fairly early age—by adolescence.

# Familial Identity


- In contrast, the familial identity, evident in many collectivist cultures, stresses the importance of emotional connectedness to and interdependence with others. For example, in many African and Asian societies, and in some cultural groups in the United States, children are encouraged and expected to form strong, interdependent bonds, first with the family and later with other groups. As one of our students explains,


- 
- *To be Mexican American is to unconditionally love one's family and all it stands for. Mexican-Americans are an incredibly close-knit group of people, especially when it comes to family. We are probably the only culture that can actually recite the names of our fourth cousins by heart. In this respect our families are like clans, they go much further than the immediate family and very deep into extended families. We even have a celebration, Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead), that honors our ancestors.*




# Dimensions of Identity

- In these societies, educational, occupational, and even marital choices are made by individuals with extensive family guidance. The goal of the developed identity is not to become independent from others but rather to gain an understanding of and cultivate one's place in the complex web of interdependence with others. Communication scholar Ge Gao (1996) describes the Chinese sense of self:
- *The other-orientation thus is key to an interdependent self. Congruous with the notion of an interdependent self, the Chinese self also needs to be recognized, defined, and completed by others. The self's orientation to others' needs, wishes, and expectations is essential to the development of the Chinese self. ( p. 84)*

- 
- The third dimension is the spiritual identity, the inner spiritual reality that is realized and experienced to varying extents by people through a number of outlets. For example, the spiritual self in India is expressed through a structure of gods and goddesses and through rituals and meditation. In Japan, the realization of the spiritual self tends more toward aesthetic modes, such as the tea ceremony and flower arranging (Roland, 1988).


- 
- **spiritual identity** Identification with feelings of connectedness to others and higher meanings in life.





- 
- Clearly, identity development does not occur in the same way in every society. The notion of identity in India, Japan, and some Latino/a and Asian American groups emphasizes the integration of the familial and the spiritual self but very little of the more individualized self.
  - This is not to say there is not considerable individuality among people in these groups. However, the general identity contrasts dramatically with the pre-dominant mode in most U.S. cultural groups, in which the individualized self is emphasized and there is little attention to the familial self. However, there may be some development of the spiritual self among devout Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, or Muslim individuals.

# Spiritual identity

- Groups play an important part in the development of all these dimensions of self. As we are growing up, we identify with many groups, based on gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, religion, and nationality (Tajfel, 1981, 1982). And depending on our cultural background, we may develop tight or looser bonds with these groups (Kim, 2002). By comparing ourselves and others with members of these groups, we come to understand who we are. Because we
- **spiritual identity** Identification with feelings of connectedness to others and higher meanings in life.
- Chapter 5 / Identity and Intercultural Communication **165**
- **166** Part 2 / Intercultural Communication Processes

- 
- **identity negotiation theory** A theory that emphasizes the process of communicating one's own desired identities while reinforcing or resisting others' identities as the core of intercultural communication.
  - belong to various groups, we develop multiple identities that come into play at different times, depending on the context.

- 
- **identity negotiation theory** A theory that emphasizes the process of communicating one's own desired identities while reinforcing or resisting others' identities as the core of intercultural communication.
  - For example, in going to church or temple, we may highlight our religious identity. In going to clubs or bars, we may highlight our sexual orientation identity. Women who join social groups exclusive to women (or men who attend social functions just for men) are highlighting their gender identity.

- 
- Communication scholar Ting-Toomey (1993, 2005) argues in her identity negotiation theory that cultural variability influences our sense of self and ultimately influences how successful we are in intercultural interactions. Her argument goes like this: Individuals define themselves in relation to groups they belong to due to the basic human need for security and inclusion. At the same time, humans also need differentiation from these same groups. Managing relationships to these various groups involves boundary regulation and working through the tension between inclusion and differentiation and can make us feel secure or vulnerable.



# Conclusion

- How we manage this tension influences the coherent sense of self (identity)—individuals who are more secure are more open to interacting with members of other cultures. When people feel good about themselves and the groups to which they belong, they are more successful in intercultural interactions. However, as we will see in the next section, identities are formed not just by the individual but also through interactions with others.